

More Floggings and Inflation:

The Fruits of Reform in Iran

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Articles & Testimony

Now that Tony Blair has returned from Texas, he faces criticism over his support of "regime change" in Iraq. Just two decades ago, the West supported Saddam Hussein, seeing the Iraqi president as a force for moderation in the Middle East. Yet, while statesmen focus on what to do in Iraq, one country in the "Axis of Evil", foreign ministers across Europe appear to be making the same mistakes in another -- Iran.

On May 26, 1997, Iranians elected Muhammad Khatami to the presidency of the Islamic Republic. He won nearly 70 per cent of the vote in elections marked by an 80 per cent turnout. Academics, journalists and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic lauded Khatami's victory. Many commentators called for an end to Iran's ostracism. If Khatami is a genuine reformer, goes the logic, then the West should support him in his struggle against the Islamic Republic's hardliners.

So Jack Straw went to Teheran, and numerous other European leaders have hosted the Iranian president. But can engagement work? Is the reform versus hardline dichotomy within the Islamic Republic real, or merely a creation of the Western media?

Well into his second term, Khatami has yet to enact a single substantive reform. He appears merely to be engaged in a carefully choreographed dance with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in order to win the Islamic Republic diplomatic space from an audience willing to accept rhetoric over reality.

Between 1982 and 1992, Khatami served as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in effect acting as the regime's chief censor. Many commentators argue that his tenure showed his liberalism. Gary Sick, a former US National Security Council specialist on Iran, said: "Khatami permitted the introduction of hundreds of original and provocative publications."

In fact, Khatami censored more than 600 books and banned perhaps 90 publications. In his recently published memoirs, Grand Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri described a purge in 1988 of political prisoners that resulted in several thousand deaths. Khatami was a member of the ruling council at the time and intimately involved -- at least administratively -- in the purge. Montazeri is under house arrest and his memoirs remain banned in Iran, even though every culture minister since 1997 has been a Khatami appointee.

Is Khatami a supporter of democracy? While still a parliamentarian, he published an essay in the official daily, Keyhan. On participation in government, he wrote: "Knowledge of God's commandment must be the foundation of individual and collective life. Acquiring such comprehension requires several years of studies and much effort." In other words, democracy is fine so long as power is limited to the mullahs and ayatollahs.

Many commentators who laud Khatami's democratic triumph fail to mention that his election victory became possible only when the Iranian government banned 234 other candidates deemed too liberal. With many of the real reformists banned or in prison, Khatami's victory confirmed what Iranians have always known: winning elections

does not mean that people like you for who you are. They like you for who you are not. Victory goes to the least offensive candidate.

Khatami's post-1997 record is as disappointing as his past. He has failed to deliver promised reforms or protect civil society. In the past 18 months, the Iranian government has closed more than 50 papers, banned private internet service providers, seized thousands of satellite dishes and staged the largest trial of dissidents since the Islamic Revolution.

More than 600,000 Iranians languish in prison, according to the judiciary's own figures. While some commentators argue that the president is powerless to act because he does not control the centres of power, the sad fact is that Khatami has refused to exercise what power he does possess to speak up as his supporters are hauled off to prison.

The only things that have increased under Khatami are floggings, executions and inflation. In 1977, Iran's per capita income was equivalent to Spain's. Now it is equivalent to that of the Gaza Strip. The fiscal situation is worse now than during the leanest years of the Iran-Iraq War.

Even as inflation nears 20 per cent and purchasing power declines, Khatami's government spends lavishly on arms and the development of weapons of mass destruction. German, Italian and Spanish laboratory equipment furnishes Iran's biological weapons factories. In March 2001, Khatami signed a \$7 billion deal to purchase arms from Russia. In August 1998, he defended Iran's expensive investment in its ballistic missile programme. The multi-billion dollar Bushehr nuclear reactor is scheduled to come online in December 2003.

Meanwhile, Iranian textile workers and nurses strike for unpaid wages. Khatami's reformism is more illusion than reality. Iranians find it ironic that Western diplomats, journalists and commentators still judge their president by his rhetoric, even as Khatami's supporters acknowledge that he is hardly different from Rafsanjani or Khamenei. It is no accident that last October, in the largest anti-regime protests since the Islamic Revolution, students, women, government workers, journalists and even soldiers took to the street chanting "Death to Khatami" and "We love the USA". In December, students heckled Khatami when he spoke at Teheran University, chanting "Khatami, Khatami, Honesty! Honesty!" and "No more slogans. We want action!"

The Iranian people crave reform, and Europe and America should encourage them. But Western diplomats and commentators must learn what the Iranians already know. If reform is to be successful, it must be based not on myth but on reality. ❖

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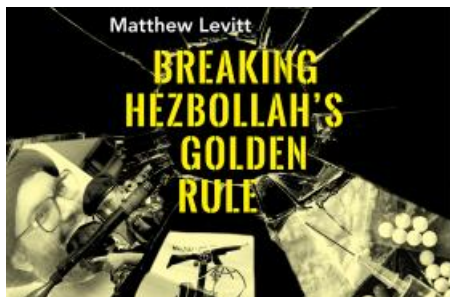
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